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# Intergenerational cultural transmission

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## Abstract

Intergenerational transmission refers to the exchange of some good or service between one generation and another. Social learning is a basic activity of people in human societies. In this study pensioners and children from grade two in comprehensive school partake in a mutual intergenerational cultural transmission. Five pensioners have declared themselves willing to meet with some children and to tell them about old times. The researcher met with the pensioners and asked them to tell their life stories. From these stories the researcher together with the pensioners then isolated one theme for each story about which the pensioner would discuss with the children. From the first meeting on, the next steps were decided upon by the pensioner and the children. The meetings were video filmed, whereupon a reduced story was created and analyzed. We ask: Can schoolchildren and pensioners in a reciprocal transmission of culture form lasting friendships that enrich the lives of both? We analysed the reduced stories using the division into hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic, and cultural codes introduced by Barthes. Here we present the results of the analysis of Monica's and Nicole's meetings. After their third meeting Monica invites Nicole to visit her whenever she likes to.

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## 1. Introduction

Intergenerational transmission refers to the movement or exchange of some good or service between one generation and another. It is one dimension of the larger concept of intergenerational relations, which is frequently used to describe behaviors involving older and younger people in society at large. What is transmitted may be intangible and include beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes. Social learning is a basic activity of people in human societies. The continued existence of society depends on the transmission of culture to the young. Smith, Kalish, Griffiths, and Lewandowsky (2008) provide a summary of some consequences of cultural transmission for the evolution of human behavior. Flynn (2008) investigates whether children reproduce actions that are redundant to the goal of a task, looking at whether the reproduction of redundant behavior spreads along diffusion chains consisting of generations of dyadic interactions, where the learner in a dyad becomes the model for the subsequent learner.

In this study pensioners and children from grade two in comprehensive school partake in a mutual intergenerational cultural transmission. The pensioners find new meaning and content of life. Through the contact to children they are able to retain their own identity. In today's society children live in their own world with few contacts to grown-ups and elderly people. Therefore it is important for them to learn from the narratives of and interactions with the old ones; they find their own roots. The research question is: Can schoolchildren and pensioners in a reciprocal transmission of culture form lasting friendships that enrich the lives of both?

## 2. Methodology

Phenomenology as philosophy concerns the essence of things from the perspective of an experiencing subject. In phenomenological experience subject and object are integrated – what I see is interwoven with how I see it and with whom I am. As a research method in education phenomenology “ward[s] off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project” (van Manen 1990, 29).

When we talk about reduction in phenomenology, this is an activity carried out by the researcher. Her/his preconceived notions should be put to the side. The aim is to allow the phenomenon to present itself to her instead of her imposing preconceived ideas on it. Reduction, as used in analysis of interviews, involves bracketing of all casual explanations, generalizations, abstract views, and interpretations. Concrete details are asked for. The uniqueness of the particular phenomenon that we are interested in is brought into focus. Thus a direct and primitive contact with the world as we experience it is achieved. (van Manen 2002)

We analysed reduced stories using the division into hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic, and cultural codes introduced by Barthes (1975, 17-27). The hermeneutic code covers utterances that give rise to puzzlement and questions. The semic code covers groupings of elements of meaning that give rise to a single thematic group. The symbolic code examines basic binary oppositions that are repeatedly reflected in the text and that refer to common knowledge. Under the proairetic code we study the verbs and look for their main semantic fields. The cultural code includes references to a certain way of thinking and way of life. The hermeneutic and proairetic codes are connected to the time and action aspect. They should therefore contain a chronological order to make sense of them in a narrative. Together the five codes point to the multifaceted nature of the text.

## 3. Method

In south Finland a senior house is built next to a comprehensive school (grades 1-6). The two buildings are connected through a corridor. The dining room in the senior house is used also by the schoolchildren. The intention of the architect has been to bring pensioners and children into contact with each other. Several projects have been developed with this purpose in mind. In the project reported in this study the perspective has been from the point of view of the pensioners. Some pensioners have declared themselves willing to meet with some children and to tell them about old times. The researcher met with the pensioners and asked them to tell their life stories. From these stories the researcher together with the pensioners then isolated one theme for each story about which the pensioner would discuss with the children. The first meeting would be between the pensioner and one or two children. A teacher, who had acquainted herself to the pensioners' themes, selected the children from grade two of the school. From the first meeting on the next steps were decided upon by the pensioner and the children. Much depended on whether children and pensioner could find a common interest. In this study we concentrate on the process of Monica's meetings with Nicole and, later, also her two friends. The meetings were video filmed, whereupon a reduced story was created and analyzed.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *The symbolic code*

The main symbolic code in the narrative about Monica and Nicole is formed by the generational disparity between the two discussants. The relation between the counterparts is at the beginning moving from Monica to Nicole. Nicole needs some time to adjust to Monica. Only at the end of their first meeting she opens up.

Already at the beginning, while Monica and Nicole discuss Nicole's work, Monica is wondering what will happen. She expects more people to appear to partake in the event. Later on, when Monica has shown some of her own works, she comments: “No other ones seem to come?” And at the very end of the meeting she exclaims: “How much longer do we need to wait for those people?” This indicates that Monica is a bit afraid of what will be demanded of her. She does not realize that the conversation with Nicole is the intent of the meeting.

#### 4.2 *The semic code*

It so happens that at their first meeting Monica and Nicole are dressed in a very similar way: both wear dark cardigans over fresh pastel colored shirts and dark skirts. Monica wonders if this indicates that they have similar dispositions. Does Nicole like handicraft? It turns out that handicraft is/was a favorite school subject for both, and furthermore their best.

The creativity of both Monica and Nicole find its expression in handicraft; neither is good at singing or music. Monica starts to tell about her first handicraft work, a coffee-pan cloth. She had just started school; this was during the war. At that time it was impossible to buy woolen yarn. So Monica learnt how to spin. She became quite good at it. But now her spinning wheel is old and in a bad fashion. Nicole thinks that her family has an old spinning wheel at their summer house. But she has never tried to spin. Monica will try to get her spinning wheel in working fashion again; she feels that it would be important to her. But she still does not have all her things ...

#### 4.3 *The cultural code*

Monica, being a retired teacher, creates a school like atmosphere in her conversation with Nicole.

The common Christian culture of Nicole and Monica is expressed in the use of cross-stitch embroidery on the Christmas table cloths that Monica shows and in her suggestion to make Christmas cards with cross-stitch embroidery.

Cross-stitch is a popular form of counted-thread embroidery in which X-shaped stitches in a tiled, raster-like pattern are used to form a picture. Monica's cross-stitch embroidery can be divided in two groups; those where the amount of stitches is large and the color of the thread is bright; and those where the color and/or fabric of the cloth are dominating.

The special culture of the Martha organization, a Finnish organization, founded by Lucina Hagman in 1899, protrudes in Monica's story about her spinning experiences. The activity of the organisation is defined as follows: It is a citizens' organisation providing advice in home economics, with the aim of furthering welfare in homes and families, and providing diverse activities and possibilities of influencing the community.

#### 4.4 *The proaireticcode*

The verbs can be grouped according to representation of different branches of handicraft (to sew, to spin, to crochet, to weave, to knit) different approaches (to tag, to fix, to fit, to make, to calculate), affections expressed (to like, to want to, to try, to provoke), and verbs connected to Monica's present situation of life (to move, to take along, to use, to buy, to glue, to dry).

Monica asks how the thread is fixed on the backside of Nicole's embroidery. Nicole answers that just so as not to give way. Now Monica understands that the final work is to be on the hard paper, not on cloth. She suggests that Nicole embroiders Christmas cards with cross-stitches. Cross-stitch embroidery can also be used for example to tag towels. Other stitches are used if you sew linen napkins with an edging. You then remove some tread along the border.

Monica is unhappy that she does not have all her things with her yet as she has only recently moved to the senior house. Not even books does she have. Now Monica intends to start to apply her mother's laces to sheets and pillows as she has got her sewing machine to her new home. Monica also wants to get her spinning wheel in order again.

Monica's grown-up children help her to repair her spinning wheel. She may spin again, after a long break. She phones the researcher to tell about her satisfaction. The researcher succeeds to find not worked up wool and carding combs.

#### 4.5 *The hermeneutic code*

The first meeting between Monica and Nicole takes place in Nicole's classroom in the primary school. Nicole has brought along a cross-stitch embroidery that she works on during the handicraft lessons. Monica investigates

Nicole's work. How did she do it? Did she sew it? Did she do one stitch at a time or did she sew a whole row back and forth? Monica does not immediately understand that it is the beginning of the work she has in front of her, she thinks this is just a model. She tries to understand the motif of Nicole's work: a clown. Now Nicole shows a work which is made by using the crochet technique to make a long chain and by applying it to a paper background with the help of glue. Monica at first thinks that the crochets are stitches and asks how Nicole has made these stitches, but Nicole explains that they are no stitches but crochets. Monica admires the composition. Monica's mother crocheted a lot. Monica still has laces that should be applied to sheets and pillow covers. It is a pity she has never done it.

Monica then presents some of her own cross-stitch tablecloths and discusses these with Nicole. A Christmas table cloth is filled with embroidered figures in many colors. Are there too many figures? One can also use the color of the cloth as a dominant feature and let the cross-stitch embroidery compose a frame only. Monica always investigates the back of the embroidery to see if it is well done. Cross-stitch embroidery demands concentration; one can't watch television while doing it.

It is decided that Monica will meet Nicole once more and show her how to work up wool and to spin. Two of Nicole's classmates take part in this meeting. Monica shows the girls how carding combs should be used. The wool is dirty: it is necessary to use an apron, which Monica anticipatorily has brought with her. The girls soon learn how to make carding rolls. Nicole is very eager to get some skills in spinning.

To spin is rather difficult, as one has to keep the wheel spinning all the time while forming the thread out of the carding rolls. It is not quite easy even to pedal. The whole spinning wheel slides away on the rather slippery floor. Nicole first tries only to pedal. Then she should form the thread and pedal at the same time. Nicole has difficulties to start with a new carding roll. She does not realize that the new fibers are dragged along and intertwined with the last old ones. One has to form the thread rather far from the bobbin so that there is place for the thread to become twined.

After the meeting Nicole helps Monica to take back her things to her home. Monica invites her to visit whenever she likes to. They thus can deepen their common interest of handicraft.

## **5. Discussion**

Experience can be seen as an activity of encounter with the world. Experiential descriptions in literature, biography, and art are all sources for lived experience. Phenomenological reflection can proceed in the mode of activity, when we reflect on the way the world becomes available to us through active exploration. (Noë 2002)

Reciprocal learning is a cooperative, collegial method in which there is a mutuality of personal interaction, assistance, and benefits. Something reciprocal is defined as something done, felt, given, etc. in return. A reciprocal action expresses a mutual action or relation between counterparts. Both those, who receive and those, who supply, benefit from the activities. In our study it becomes clear that both Monica and Nicole enjoy their meetings. Monica again gets into contact with her former profession. She feels that teaching Nicole how to spin opens new doors for both herself and Nicole. Nicole learns about life in Monica's childhood.

Numerous intergenerational programs involve older adult community members who share their knowledge and provide social support to young children on a volunteer basis. The results include increased self-confidence on the part of children and an increased sense of self-worth on the part of older adults, many of whom have extensive knowledge and compassion to share.

## **6. Conclusion**

Unlike traditional societies that held religious and cultural beliefs in great reverence emphasis has now shifted to scientific proof and rationality based on market capitalism. Traditional values include the conduct of an individual's relationship to the natural environment, interpersonal relationships, and addresses issues of individual self-discipline.

Intergenerational relations are a part of our social identity. They have essential effects on the experiences and quality of life of older and young people in particular settings, and important implications for community cohesion.

We conclude that intergenerational practice has a valuable contribution to make to the achievement of sustainable communities.

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